

HOW TO... Catalogue your documents

Whatever happened to the paperless office? Rod Lawton shows you how to manage documents with just a desktop scanner and a simple image-cataloguing program

We seem to be deluged with more paperwork than ever, as statements, bills, letters, journals and receipts pile up quicker than we can deal with them. We either have to bin the lot or wedge them into a filing cabinet already stuffed with papers.

There are document-management systems on the market, but most are aimed at corporate customers running a centralised server and a building full of client workstations. You could get a package such as PaperPort (www.nuance.co.uk) but it costs £100, which is still a lot if you don't need optical character recognition (OCR), PDF creation, multipage scans and network capability (see next month's *Shopper* for our Labs review of OCR software). All most of us want is to look up a letter from the bank manager without rooting through our filing cabinet. We don't want it to be turned into an editable text document; we just need to be able to read it.

You can do this with a scanner and Picasa, or any other photo-cataloguing program. With Picasa's keywords, descriptions, albums and folders, you have all the document-management tools you need. Picasa is free and can be downloaded from <http://picasa.google.com>.

1 First, scan in your documents. It's possible to tie yourself up in knots with scanner settings, but here we can keep it simple. Most scanners default to 100 per cent scaling. This means the document size (and the size it will print at later) is the same as the original. For our purposes, you don't need a resolution higher than 200dpi. This is fine for producing a legible onscreen view or printout. You can scan in black

and white, greyscale or colour. It depends on whether your original will translate legibly into black and white or greyscale, and whether you want scans that look exactly like the original. Colour is the simplest option.

2 Once you've made the scan you need to save it. Pick a logical location that you'll remember later for storing these scans. Because of the way we're going to organise them, don't worry about splitting them into subfolders. One big Documents folder will be fine. If you expect to scan lots of documents, keep file sizes to a minimum. The JPEG format is the most space-efficient, and a medium-quality setting will be fine. We just want legible documents, after all, and we're not working with pixel-perfect photos.

3 We've collected a dozen or so scans, so now we can use Picasa to display them. You'll need to add the folder you've created to Picasa's Folder Manager using the Tools menu. If you also want to use Picasa for your photo collection, add the Documents folder to Picasa's list. But if you want to reserve Picasa for your documents only, remove everything from the list then add the new folder. Use the Remove from Picasa button for the first step, then use the Scan Always button for your new folder.

4 Picasa is an image editor as well as an image organiser. If you have any documents that

have been scanned in sideways, you can rotate them using the buttons at the bottom of the window. If any have been cropped badly, double-click to go into Picasa's Edit mode and use the Crop and Straighten tools, on the left-hand toolbar, to put them right. The Rotate buttons are still available at the bottom of the screen when you're in Edit mode. You can fix any colour or contrast problems while you're there.

5 There are two ways in Picasa to organise your documents; you can even use both at once, but it can get confusing. The first way is to arrange your documents into Albums. In previous versions of Picasa, these were called Labels. A single document can be stored in many different Albums, which makes them more flexible than using folders in Windows where the files remain in their original location and are not moved. Click the Add To button at the bottom of the screen and select New Album.

6 Keywords may prove more flexible in the long run. Call up Picasa's Keywords palette by pressing Ctrl-K. Keywords are typed into the window at the top of the palette. Any keywords already applied to the image appear in the list below. As you type in a keyword, Picasa displays near matches in its list, which helps to avoid multiple instances of the same keyword spelt slightly differently. To find images that match keywords, type the keyword into the search box at the top right of the Picasa window. **CS**

DID YOU KNOW?

Your scanner may come with an OCR program that can turn paper documents into editable text files. It may also have document-management software and the ability to scan multipage documents into a multipage file.

